Facing the China Factor

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President Bill Clinton's September 1 announcement that he would defer a decision on deployment of a national missile defense (NMD) system may have averted a new crisis in U.S.-Chinese relations, but the respite will likely be short-lived. Pressure in Congress for NMD deployment may be unrelenting, and any new administration will probably review the NMD program with a bias toward deployment. Washington has an opportunity to work the issue with China and thus prevent a further downturn in relations with Beijing—but only if it seizes the opportunity created by the Clinton delay.

The U.S. NMD program emerged this year as a new and growing source of tension in U.S.-Chinese relations. In the absence of anything more than verbal assurances to Beijing that the system is not aimed at China, a presidential decision to proceed with construction of an NMD radar in Alaska would have confirmed China's suspicions that the United States views it as an enemy. The result could well have been reduced cooperation on a wide range of issues of strategic concern to the United States, especially proliferation.

Over the last several years, the Chinese have become increasingly apprehensive about the implications of U.S. ballistic missile defense systems, both theater and national. Until recently, the Chinese leadership had been focused on theater missile defenses (TMD) as a perceived threat to China's core national interest in preventing Taiwan's independence. Although the Chinese have opposed provision of any TMD system to Taiwan, their greatest concern is that Washington will provide Taiwan with TMD that is operationally linked to the U.S. military. Such linkages, they say, would constitute de facto restoration of the U.S.-Taiwanese military alliance, severed when Washington's normalized relations with Beijing in 1979, and signal political support for Taiwan's independence forces. Although the Chinese leadership remains concerned about the possible transfer of U.S. TMD to Taiwan, the TMD issue in U.S.-Chinese relations has eased somewhat since at the moment Taiwan is not requesting—and the United States is not considering selling—TMD that would be operationally linked to the U.S. military.

Just as tensions over the TMD issue were easing, however, China's leaders were suddenly confronted with a potentially more serious threat to Chinese security: NMD. This time, the U.S. missile defense system in question was viewed as constituting a direct military threat to China's national security, as well as a political and strategic challenge to Beijing.

The U.S. NMD system is too small to neutralize Russia's huge nuclear arsenal, and the Clinton administration's explanation that defenses are necessary to counter a potential long-range missile threat from "rogue nations" or "states of concern" is simply not credible to Chinese officials and researchers. In their view, states such as North Korea, Iran, and Iraq would not risk virtually certain suicide by attacking the United States with nuclear weapons.

Once the Chinese eliminate the Russians as the system's target and dismiss the "rogue threat," they are left with the question of why the United States would want to pay the economic and political cost of deploying an NMD system when it is already able to militarily dominate any adversary. The answer, many fear, is to neutralize China as the United States pursues its own hegemonic ambitions at the expense of Chinese security and interests.
The Chinese worry that a U.S. NMD would undermine the credibility of China's nuclear deterrent force, for which China has paid dearly over the past four decades in an effort to assert its independence from the superpowers and enhance its claim to great power status. They are concerned that even the C-1 system, in which eventually 100 interceptors would be deployed at a single site in Alaska, could potentially intercept all of China's current arsenal, which reportedly consists of about 20 single-warhead ICBMs capable of reaching the continental United States.

Many Chinese further see NMD as part of a U.S. drive for absolute military superiority that would give America the ability to intervene around the world with impunity to enhance its hegemonic position. More specifically, the Chinese fear that a United States protected against a Chinese retaliatory strike could subject China to nuclear blackmail—especially in a Taiwan crisis—and would thus be emboldened to back a Taiwanese thrust for permanent, de jure independence.

Chinese officials are also concerned that U.S. deployment of even a limited NMD system would undermine the progress made in arms control over the last decade, a period during which, they say, Washington and Beijing often worked closely together. In their view, although the United States and China sometimes have attacked each other's positions publicly, they have in fact worked to achieve the same ends on arms control and non-proliferation.

The list of joint accomplishments includes concluding the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, extending the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, halting the North Korean nuclear weapons program through the 1994 Agreed Framework, and jointly responding with the other nuclear-weapon states to the 1998 nuclear tests by India and Pakistan. After working so long with the United States on these issues, Chinese arms control officials now feel "betrayed" by the U.S. pursuit of an NMD system that would directly threaten China's "national security interest" by undermining its nuclear deterrent. Many Chinese officials are left wondering why they should bother cooperating with the United States.

U.S. efforts to assuage these concerns have been largely reactive. The unfortunate reality seems to be that the Clinton administration, preoccupied with the "rogue threat" and with getting the Russians on board to modify the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, did not consider the impact of its NMD plans on China until very late in the game. According to administration officials, there was virtually no serious consideration of the China factor in internal high-level deliberations on NMD until late last year, despite efforts at lower levels of the bureaucracy and by outside experts to raise the issue of China's likely reaction to NMD deployment.

When it became clear that Beijing would object strongly to any move to deploy a U.S. NMD, administration officials struggled, with little success, to convince China that it had nothing to fear. The Clinton administration sought privately as well as publicly to reassure the Chinese that the initial NMD capability being developed, and even its more robust follow-ons, were aimed only at emerging missile threats from "states of concern" and possible accidental launches.

Although some senior Chinese researchers and officials are willing to believe that the Clinton administration's explanations are sincere, widespread Chinese suspicions that China is, in fact, the "target" of the U.S. NMD system persist. And whatever U.S. intentions toward China, the Chinese point out that the system would have the capability to neutralize China's deterrent. Moreover, they question the value of reassurances from the Clinton administration when the next administration could decide to deploy a far more extensive system or one explicitly aimed at China.

As long as Beijing thinks there is a chance the entire program could be canceled or shelved indefinitely, it is likely to remain unalterably opposed to any NMD deployment. This would obviously be the best outcome from China's point of view and would likely have the most salutary impact on U.S.-Chinese relations.

However, the Chinese realize that there are those in Washington, especially in Congress and potentially in the next administration, who are firmly committed to NMD and still others who want specifically to "capture" China's nuclear deterrent. Although the Senate's September 19 approval of permanent normal trade relations constitutes a significant step forward in U.S.-Chinese relations, it is not likely to change the strident anti-China tone in Congress and the media. It will not be easy for an
administration to explicitly forego deployment of an NMD system that would neutralize China's deterrent.

If, in the end, the United States decides to deploy an NMD—particularly one that appears to be or is in fact directed against China—the up-front costs to U.S. security will be significant. Although the strength of the Chinese reaction would likely be tempered by whether the U.S. system was explicitly intended to capture China's deterrent, several consequences are likely:

- China will likely commit itself to trying to defeat whatever system the U.S. plans to deploy. The Chinese believe that they have had a small but credible nuclear retaliatory force vis-à-vis the United States for nearly two decades, and they are unlikely to willingly relinquish this deterrent any more than would the Americans. Although China is already engaged in a nuclear modernization program to field less vulnerable mobile, solid-fueled missiles, the quantitative expansion of the arsenal and the qualitative improvements that are made to it (e.g., MIRVs, decoys, penetration aids) are likely to be a function of the perceived need to defeat the U.S. NMD.

- The Chinese may conclude that the United States has decided that China is its enemy and is preparing for possible military conflict, presumably over Taiwan. A China convinced of hostile U.S. intentions would be far less likely to cooperate with the United States on a range of issues of strategic importance to the United States, especially non-proliferation concerns on the Korean Peninsula and in South Asia and the Middle East.

- China would seek to enhance its diplomatic efforts, including with U.S. allies, to isolate the United States on the NMD issue. America's allies, especially in Asia, might be persuaded that the U.S. NMD program was responsible for a serious deterioration in U.S.-Chinese relations and lose confidence in U.S. leadership.

- Beijing would also seek closer collaboration with Russia on developing military countermeasures to missile defense and coordinating opposition to U.S. policies and strategic objectives.

It may still be possible to prevent this outcome. With the decision on NMD deployment now deferred to Clinton's successor, the United States has a valuable opportunity to rectify the damage to U.S.-Chinese relations and—just possibly—to find a compromise solution on missile defense deployments.

Although the most important decisions will be left to the next administration, the first steps could be taken in the remaining months of the Clinton presidency. First, the United States could seek to intensify high-level dialogue with China on the strategic implications of NMD deployment. On a lower level or in an unofficial forum, technical experts could explain to their Chinese counterparts U.S. concerns about the capabilities of potentially hostile states and discuss the limitations of the U.S. system. Chinese technical experts in turn could illuminate the strategic implications of even a limited NMD system for the Chinese nuclear deterrent. Furthermore, Chinese privately suggest that the United States could build confidence by keeping them informed, formally or informally, of U.S. negotiations with Russia on amending the ABM Treaty.

Second, the current administration could begin a comprehensive study of the short- and long-term costs and benefits to the United States of an NMD system that is, either explicitly or implicitly, directed against China. That study could be ready for the next administration to ensure that before it makes its final decision on deployment it has carefully and thoroughly considered what the United
States' strategic posture toward China should be and what role, if any, national missile defense should play in that posture.

If the next administration were to consider shelving U.S. plans for national missile defense, it could use that prospect as leverage to pursue U.S. non-proliferation and arms control goals with China, not only on missile proliferation, but also on nuclear arms control measures such as a fissile material cutoff treaty or eventual sharp reductions in strategic nuclear weapons. Some Chinese officials have suggested that if the United States were to forego NMD deployment, Beijing would work more closely with the United States and the other nuclear-weapon states to negotiate a new missile non-proliferation regime or turn the Missile Technology Control Regime into a treaty. Such an approach could advance U.S. security while entailing none of the political or economic costs of proceeding with NMD.

Alternatively, if the new administration is committed to NMD deployment but does not seek to capture China's deterrent and is willing to take the politically sensitive step of engaging the Chinese on the issue, then it might be possible to reach an understanding with China on NMD that allows for a deployment of a limited system without creating a major crisis in U.S.-Chinese relations. The price to the United States would be concrete American assurances—if, indeed, such assurances are technically possible—that would convince the Chinese that the deterrent force they plan to have deployed at the time the U.S. system is fielded would not be compromised. In return, China would be expected to respond to such a significant gesture by showing similar respect for U.S. security interests regarding non-proliferation, regional peace and stability, and military activities toward Taiwan, as well as by displaying greater flexibility in its Taiwan policy.

The Chinese may not be eager partners, but they have good reason to cut a deal. China's top priority is economic development, which requires a peaceful international environment in general and good relations with the United States in particular. Beijing wants to avoid a costly and destabilizing offense-defense arms race with the United States and the mutual enmification that would likely accompany competition in strategic forces. Moreover, worsening relations would likely be counterproductive in Beijing's effort to prevent Taiwan's independence and pull Taipei into cross-Strait talks.

Further, many Chinese arms control specialists recognize that NMD may well be deployed whether China likes it or not and that China should consider forging a deal with the United States. Chinese scientists and engineers are already exploring combinations of Chinese modernization programs and U.S. limited deployment options—including both land-based systems in the United States (but not Alaska) and boost-phase systems that could be deployed close to "states of concern"—that would guarantee China's deterrent if it deployed ICBMs deep in its interior.

The process of working out an agreement with China on NMD could also strengthen U.S.-Chinese relations at a time when the United States is likely to need more, not less, cooperation with China on a range of important issues. A U.S.-Chinese dialogue on NMD deployment that resembles U.S.-Russian exchanges in both range and depth would provide strategic reassurance to Beijing that Washington does not view it as an enemy, has no desire to enter into a U.S.-China strategic arms race, and is willing to be transparent about NMD plans.

Resolving the NMD issue with China would not eliminate the deepening mutual suspicions that have plagued U.S.-Chinese relations, especially since the mistaken U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in May 1999. The United States would remain suspicious about Chinese ambitions, especially vis-à-vis Taiwan and U.S. interests in Asia. And China might not be confident that the United States would forego building a far more robust system in the future should the technology be available and cost-effective. Nevertheless, the Chinese are likely to welcome an effort by the United States to provide concrete technical assurances that a U.S. NMD system would not neutralize the Chinese deterrent force. And the United States would benefit from a China that is more inclined to be cooperative, including on non-proliferation.

The new administration is likely to see engaging China on NMD as entailing significant domestic political risks. The anti-China political climate in the United States makes reasoned and reasonable discussion of this issue especially difficult. But the United States has important and perhaps critical national interests at stake in how the China factor in NMD is managed, and these interests—not
partisan politics or ideological commitments to NMD—should guide U.S. policy.

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